

Praneet Mekala

I Section

Ms. Small

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### Views of War in Ancient Greece

From the dawn of mankind, conflict has played a central role in the development of society. Conflicts have resulted in the creation of cities and the formation of entire societies. However, when left to fester, these conflicts spiral out of control and wars emerge. Wars have been in society for a lot longer than one would expect; the first recorded war took place in 2700 BCE between Sumer and Elam. Although the idea of wars have stayed the same- two sides fight until the other concedes- the attitudes towards war have changed throughout history. In the two texts *The Iliad* by Homer and *The Women of Troy* by Euripides, heavenly interactions, the importance of honor and the view of death show the different perspectives that the characters and authors of the stories have towards the concept of war.

Although, in both texts, the gods play a key role in the events that unfold, the authors' portrayal of the gods reveal the attitude that the authors have towards war. In *The Iliad*, Homer characterizes the gods by using dialogues between characters. The characters in *The Iliad* generally think very highly of the gods, and pray to them hoping that they can change the outcome of the war. For example, in Book Six, Hektor, the hero of the Trojans, goes to Troy in the middle of the war to tell all the Trojan women to pray to the goddess Athene. In the epic, Hektor says, "if only she will have pity on the town of Troy, and the Trojan wives, and their innocent children, if she will hold back from sacred Ilion the son of Tydeus" (Homer 76). Hektor, the symbol of the Trojan ideologies, believes that Athene can control what mortals do,

such as preventing Achilles, the son of Tydeus, to enter the battle. Furthermore, this all-powerful opinion of the gods is shown when the Trojan women go to the temple to pray to Athene, as per Hektor's wishes. During their prayer, they say something similar to what Hektor had said previously: "if only you will have pity on the town of Troy, and the Trojan wives, and their innocent children" (Homer 76). The repetition of the idea that Athene is able to change the outcome of the war indicates that the Trojans believed the gods are all-powerful. This view of the gods influences the image of war to the Trojans. The fact that the Trojans ask Athene to change the outcome of the war shows how they believe that the gods are able to control what happens in the war. Since the characters believe that the gods are in control of everything that happens, it makes the war seem like a quarrel between the gods, instead of a battle between humans. Euripides, on the other hand, takes a very different approach when describing the role that the gods play in the war. In the beginning of the play, Athene makes a deal with Poseidon to make the trip back to Greece difficult for the Greeks. In the play, Euripides writes,

ATHENE: I am disposed to favour the Trojans, whom I hated; And to make  
this homeward voyage disastrous for the Greeks.

POSEIDON: But why? Surely your change of affection is somewhat casual? Why  
this leaping at random between hate and love?

ATHENE: You know of the insult offered my temple- offered to me?

POSEIDON: When Aias dragged Cassandra from sanctuary? I know.

ATHENE: No punishment from the Greeks, not even a reprimand.

The frustration that Athene expresses stems from her inability to control what the Greek soldiers, such as Aias, did to the people in her temple. Euripides' view, that the gods are not all-powerful and cannot change the events of war, is clearly shown here. Euripides' play reveals that during

his time, it was commonly believed that war was caused by humans and could not be affected by the gods. The view of war was very different between these two time periods just 400 years apart- while war was viewed as a “game” that the gods played in Homer’s time, it was viewed as an ongoing battle caused and executed by humans themselves in Euripides’ time.

In *The Iliad*, the importance of honor is defined by war, while in *The Women of Troy*, the importance of honor centers around familial bonds and faithfulness. Honor plays a major role in Greek culture, as shown by both texts. However, the impact that honor has on war is significantly different between both Homer’s and Euripides’ works. In *The Iliad*, honor is mainly focused on the battle itself. Both the Greek and Trojan soldiers, throughout much of the story, act on honor towards their respective nations. For example, in Book 6 of *The Iliad*, Hektor briefly goes back home to Andromache. Andromache begs Hektor to stay at home with her and their son, Astyanax. In the text, Andromache says, “Hektor, thus you are father to me, and my honoured mother/ you are my brother, and you it is who are my young husband/ Please take pity upon me then, stay here on the rampart” (Homer 429-431). However, to this Hektor responds, “All these things are in my mind also, lady; yet I would feel deep shame/ before the Trojans, and the Trojan women with trailing garments/ if like a coward I were to shrink aside from the fighting” (Homer 440-442). Hektor, although acknowledging Andromache’s plea, tells her that he must fight in the war to protect the women and children of Troy. Although Hektor is given the chance to run from the fighting and likely survive, he chooses to return to the battle and fight for his country. The honor that the ideal Trojan soldier shows towards his country exemplifies the importance of honor that the Ancient Greeks had towards their country. This honor drives the events that unfold during the war, such as the redeployment of Achilles into the battle. Honor towards one’s country truly defined what war was during Homer’s time. However, in *The*

*Women of Troy*, the honor of the characters is focused more towards their familial ties rather than towards the city of Troy. In the play, the queen of Troy, Hecabe, is told by a messenger, Talthybius, about the future of her daughters. Euripides writes,

HECABE: What is decided for my daughter-in-law, Iron-hearted Hector's wife,  
Andromache?

TALTHYBIUS: She too was specially chosen, by Achilles' son

HECABE: And I, whose shaking hand leans on a stick, Whose slave am I, grey-headed  
Hecabe?

Here, Hecabe is seen to worry about her entire family first, rather than her country. She worries more about what will happen to her daughters and her daughter-in-law once Troy falls rather than the city itself, even though she is its queen. This shows how important family was to the characters in the story- they worry more about their own families instead of their homeland. Because of these deep familial ties, Euripides displays a fear towards losing a loved one in war, making war seem like a death-filled catastrophe rather than a chance to display honor like Homer described. The impact that honor has on the view of war was drastically different between Euripides' play and Homer's epic poem.

Death in *The Women of Troy* is viewed as a negative outcome of war, while death in battle in *The Iliad* is viewed as the most honorable thing that a soldier can do for his country. Throughout *The Iliad*, death in battle is always portrayed as the greatest achievement that a soldier could do in his life. For example, in Book Six, when talking to Andromache, Hektor is begged to stay in Troy with the rest of his family. However, he refuses to simply just hide from the war. Instead, he chooses to go back into battle to fight for his country. In the epic poem, he says, "So will one speak of you; and for you it will be yet a fresh grief, to be widowed of such a

man who could fight off the day of your slavery” (Homer 462-463). Although Hektor knows he will die in battle, hence him saying “to be widowed of such a man,” he still chooses to fight. This shows how fearless the soldiers during Homer’s time were when dealing with war. Even knowing they would die, they still chose to fight in wars. Even knowing they would die, they still chose to fight in wars. War to them is seen as an opportunity to show loyalty to their country- it is not a place where thousands of soldiers lose their lives. This positive view of death makes them fearless towards war, giving war a good connotation in their society. However in *The Women of Troy*, the characters all view death as a negative experience, lamenting for the dead. Euripides reflects the societal view of death through characters like Hecabe and Andromache. The lamenting nature of these characters gives death a negative connotation throughout the story. This negative view of death makes war seem horrible- war is just a needless reason to die. Both Homer’s and Euripides’ portrayal of death in their works shows the distinctive differences between the attitudes towards war during their respective time periods.

Homer and Euripides express their opinion towards war throughout their works. Their descriptions of the gods, the role of honor and their views of death help effectively portray their differences in these opinions. Even today, all around the world, there is no set meaning of war. To many, war has been a brutal experience, losing their entire lives to one bomb. To others however, war is a glorified experience, a chance to show their loyalty to their country. Regardless, the view of war has been ever changing, and will continue to change for the rest of time.